

# The 1893 Faïre of Masks

## the Spectacle of the World's Columbian Exposition

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This is about architecture that exhibits itself. Since the early days of architectural theory we have been discussing the dichotomy of structure and ornament. This discussion is closely related to the historical conflict between truth and appearance, where Friedrich Nietzsche advised us “to stop courageously at the surface.”<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Bloomer has furthered the discussion by pointing out how structure has masculine connotations and ornament feminine.<sup>2</sup> The object for my investigation is The World's Columbian Exposition, an impressive world exhibition presented in Chicago in 1893, where The Woman's Building is my main entry. The staged characteristics of this architecture connects it to theater. Theatrical theory, such as Nikolaj Evreinov's idea of 'Teatralnost', is therefore brought into play to understand what it means when buildings are exhibits of themselves. Theater also makes it possible to think about power plays and gender constructions in architecture. The interpretation of architecture from a feminist perspective is of course fundamental to this text. Through theatrical devices such as scenes, masks, costumes and stages some power structures will be made to appear. How color is confused with meaning.

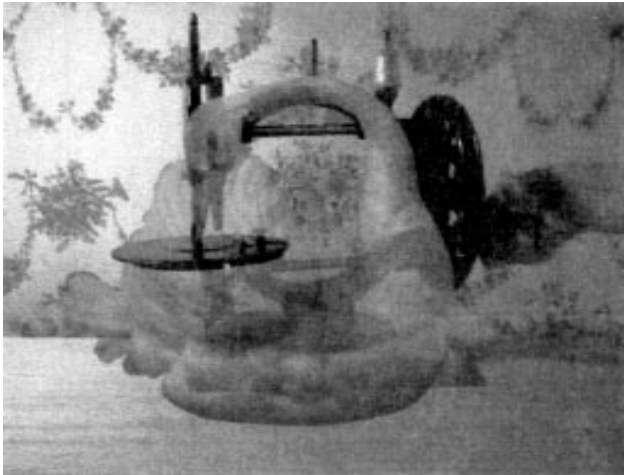


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That building normalizes certain bodies. When place transforms into event.

### Scene

Theater is a world of appearances. The story is told through the stage settings, the costumes, the masks and the body languages of the actors parallel to the spoken word. It is the surface of theater that evokes



the narratives in the audience. Certain theatrical devices, such as masks, and theatrical ways of thinking can bring out the surface of architecture. The importance of masks and masquerading to architecture was pointed out by architect Gottfried Semper in the 1850's. He wrote that "the dressing and the mask are as old as human civilization" and argued that the denial of reality is fundamental for every artistic creation.<sup>3</sup> Architecture is the festivity made permanent according to Semper.

The festival apparatus, the improvised scaffolding with all the special splendor and frills that indicate more precisely the occasion for the festivity and enhance the glorification of the day – covered with decorations, draped with carpets, dressed with boughs and flowers, adorned with festoons and garlands, fluttering banners and trophies – this is the motive of the permanent monument...<sup>4</sup>

Human civilization is arranged around the festival and the everyday. Semper made a distinction between them but, at the same time, he questioned the separation of the practical and the pleasurable as he connected the glorification of the day with the permanent. The Russian director from the beginning of last century Nikolaj Evreinov developed a theory of 'Teatralnost' – the Theatrical.<sup>5</sup> He believed that everybody had a theatrical ability to act or play. This ability provides us with ways to understand the world and carries with

itself the possibility of change. Can we find an accord between the everyday and the festival through the theatrical? The theatrical might be able to turn the daily into a festivity without denying its daily features. Even as the entrance occasionally serves as an extravagant reception it remains an entrance. It is also significant from an architectural point of view that theater is able to transform place into event and thus destabilize a static understanding of architecture.

### Costume

The World's Fair in London, 1851, triggered an important idea in Semper's thinking. Contemplating the plaited walls of a hut from Trinidad he discovered the primary importance of cladding, *Bekleidung*.<sup>6</sup> He ar-





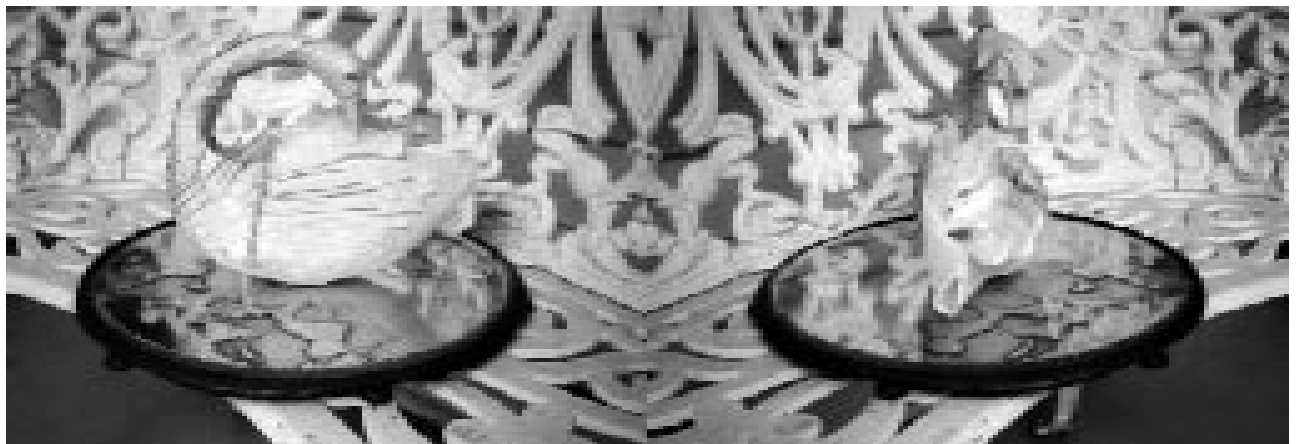
gued that the beginning of building coincides with the beginning of textiles. The argument of origin is clearly inscribed in a 19th C. debate. What is important here is not the question of the origin but that Semper reversed the hierarchical order where cladding is secondary to structure. He argued that structure is there within the wall but the importance of the wall is the visible spatial enclosure. His idea of space connects to the texture of the enclosing wall. To put it in other words, it is the dress that decides the architecture not just the clothes hanger.

Cross-dressing is fundamental to the esthetics of theater. The drag king becomes more masculine than any male, and thus questions the bipolarity of

the body by 'gender bending'. Judith Butler means, in *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity* from 1990<sup>7</sup>, that gender is not just a social construct, but even a performance, a show we put on, something we wear, a costume or a disguise – as far from essence as can be. There are no ahistorical preconditions. All the group identities of the world are performative. Which doesn't mean that they are voluntary. Theater can easily think in multiple identities. It has little problem with an identity as something strategic, something temporary. Theater is masquerade. To change dress is a possibility. You don't have to invent your own mask – just switch. The masquerade is –to borrow Ferdinand de Saussure's term – a 'system of differences', a sociality. Society is embedded in the relations between the masks before people enter the masks. The term 'scene' evokes the reciprocal relation between setting and activity, within performance. As in 'the scene of the crime', referring to the place as well as the action which took place there. In a play there are often several scenes, and they can be shifted. Gender dualism can collapse. Cross-dressing can be another way to challenge the static notion of architecture. The stage can, just like the scene, be shifted.

### Mask

Imitating the norm is a subversive action; the original loses power to an imitation. The movement is an outside-in movement similar to that which Jacques



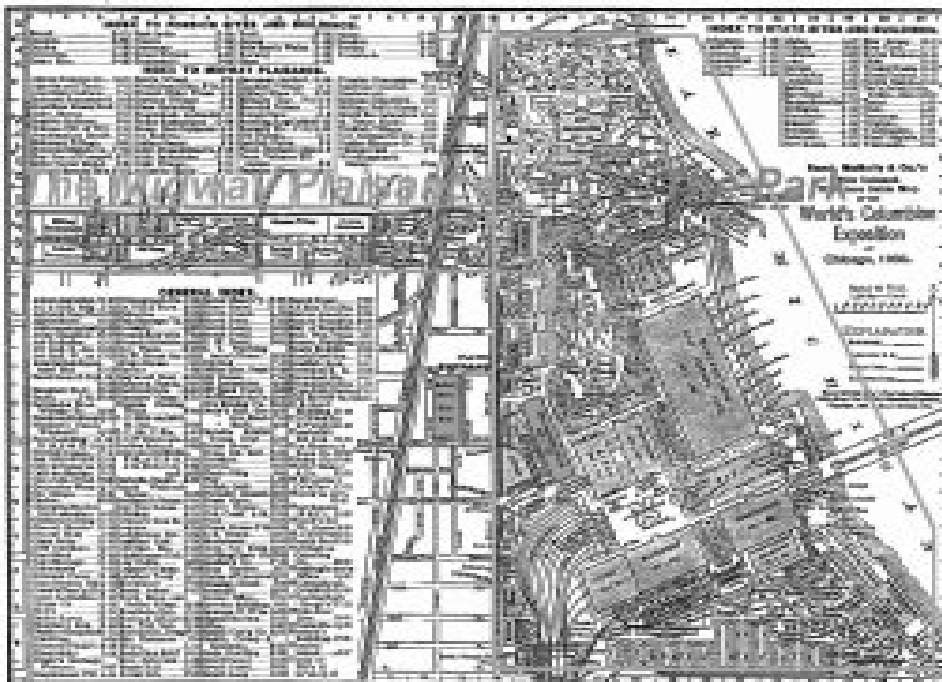
Lecoq, theater professor and another instigator of the modern revival of the theatrical,<sup>8</sup> taught me to use when creating a character. You don't have to study the psychology of a swan to play a swan. You have to study the body language of the bird, the look in its eyes, the color of its feather dress, the rhythm of its movements, and then replay it. Mimicry is creative. It is a theatrical method for invention. If you can mask yourself as a swan, you can play a swan. The mask is the surface of acting. One critical characteristic of the mask is that it hides and reveals at the same time. A mask blends with the actor's features and reveals the body. The actor can tell if the mask is played correctly by the response of the audience. There is a change in the relation between self and the other as the spectators are an absolutely necessary mirror. The material surface of the mask transforms the distance between the actor and the audience. The distance operates as a surface. This play is not behind but within the mask. The actor follows. It is a generative model infested with life, both alluring and violent. The woman is not behind but within the mask. There is no inner truth to be found by unveiling her. The disguise enables us to act. For Semper

masking was a sign of advanced culture. He wrote that in times of high artistic development the artist masked the material of the mask.<sup>9</sup>

## Stage

The stage in this investigation is comprised of architecture that exhibits itself. The stage is The World's Columbian Exposition, a grand exhibition performed in Chicago during 6 months in the year of 1893. The extensive fairgrounds were consciously divided in two parts; the representative Park and the gaudy Midway Plaisance. At the intersection of these two fields was the Woman's Building. It was a didactic layout that positioned and constructed women, "inferior" races and the regime of the world.<sup>10</sup>

The Woman's Building plays a leading role here. The Ladies' Lovely Child, as this fairground attraction was nicknamed, was the first American edifice of national importance in modern times to be designed and managed by women. It displayed the accomplishments of women. The Woman's Building had a great impact. So great that some intellectuals in the 1890's argued that the battle for equal rights had been won. As we know





today it was not that easy. It would, however, be a mistake to overlook these Ladies, who are disguised within patterns of conformity and ridiculed by patriarchal history writing. They acted within the play but they managed to alter it simultaneously.

Already in 1949 Simone de Beauvoir explained that nothing in human society is natural and that woman is a product generated by civilization.<sup>11</sup> Imitation can be a strategy to criticize the norm. Beauvoir also pointed out that 'man' doubles as both the positive pole and the neutral pole. There is no more powerful position than being just a human being, the point of reference and nothing else: the neutral mask. The singular viewpoint, such as it comes through in the plan of the World's Columbian Exposition, is the privilege of the dominant. When the perspective is changed the world shatters and there is no turning back as discoveries will be made which forever change our initial perspectives.

All architecture has a cast of characters; the human being plays a part in the architecture. What characters – genders, sexualities, ethnicities, races, religions and classes – were present and how were they constructed within the particular architecture of the World's Columbian Exposition? As already pointed out, the fairgrounds of the exposition were consciously divided in two parts – the Park and the Midway Plaisance – with an obvious hierarchy. The Park, which stretched south/north along Lake Michigan, was picturesquely fashioned with lagoons and fountains by landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted. It contained all the official buildings of the 'civilized' countries, like the Swedish, as well as modern industries and the fine arts. The exposition was popularly named the White City since the "Greek style" was requested for the buildings in the park. It was what Gottfried Semper, the great detective of the polychrome, would have called the architecture of withered bones.<sup>13</sup> The style "white classicism" infuriated architect Louis Sullivan, the soul mate of Semper. When Sullivan designed for the exposition he refu-



sed to follow the code and his Transportation Building stood out dressed as it was in shades of orange and red with a golden gate. Later on Sullivan's buildings were mostly recalled by architecture historians for their structural inventions and his queer ornaments were almost erased as they were considered insignificant.<sup>14</sup>

The project *Abodes of Theory and Flesh: Tablles of Bower*<sup>15</sup> directed by architect Jennifer Bloomer comprises a review of the Chicago scene of the latter 19<sup>th</sup> Century, or as Bloomer calls it 'Louis Sullivan's revenge.' She considers the ornaments as allegorical details and reveals how they are neither purely ornate nor purely structural. Bloomer's aim is not to reverse the hierarchy and make the ornament more important than the structure but to contest their separation. Ornaments can be understood similar to how costumes, gloves and other accessories serve as a mask for the actor, masking the body into character. They transform body and behavior. Masks play a role in the detail of buildings. Louis Sullivan designed an elaborate entrance ornament for the department store which today houses Carson, Pirie, Scott in Chicago.<sup>16</sup> It masks and thus reveals the corner of the building at State and Grand. To adorn is to make visible.

The other main part of the World's Columbian Exposition was the Midway Plaisance, a strip of amusement and exotica, with "natives" put on display in matching settings for the education of the white man. It went off west, perpendicular to the Park. Within the logic of the layout of the exposition the westernmost display was that of the Native Americans. The Midway was a coat of many colors; the Lapland Village, with about 70 inhabitants sent for from the Kola Peninsula in the Russian part of Sapmi,<sup>17</sup> was right across the street from Sitting Bull's Camp thus placed on the same stage in the ideology of development. But people challenged their given place in this worldview. When Annie Oakley<sup>18</sup> didn't perform in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show she could be seen as Sitting Bull's adopted daughter, Little Sure Shot, in the camp at the midway. This popular cowgirl and other performers of the Wild West Show played their parts in the construction of the adventurous past of the frontier.

The architecture of white classicism gave a fresh face to the New World: the dirt of the early settlers



was left behind if not without a touch of nostalgia. The clear divisions between the park and the midway, between frontier times and modernity, taught the masses the rule of the world. It manifested the United States as a world power. But even within this clear cut division there are other patterns to be found. In the book *White* Richard Dyer writes about the mix-up of meanings between the hue white, the skin-color white and the symbolic meaning of white. The white stands for the pure and clean. Things are white before they get dirty. It is argued that anything can be projected onto a white surface, it is neutral. The contrary is true for theater. The black surface allows the technician to paint and instantly switch colors by the use of light. The white skin is not of the hue white but is still called white, which connects white people with purity and cleanliness. When it comes to architecture the most notable example is of course the White House. The white building is a building of clarity and power, but also a symbol of the domination of the white man; it is not pure and innocent.<sup>19</sup> This blends with the ideology of white classicism, which refers to the democratic origin of western civilization. Maybe this mix-up of meanings is one reason why the polychrome notion of Greek architecture has not prevailed? Several buildings of the White City were in fact of other colors, but the nickname and the overall design-code paints it pure white.

There was a competition, which was open exclusively to women, for the design of the Woman's Building.

The Woman's Building was to be placed at the site where the obscure Midway Plaisance encountered the Park. Architect Sophia Hayden, 21 years old at the time, won the competition with a proposal in the requested – white – 'Italian renaissance'. At first review the Woman's Building remains anonymous, we only see a white classicistic building. To interpret it we need to remember the mix-up of meanings combined with the critical ability of the mask. The building was described in Harper's Bazaar of July 1893:

It has the characteristics of strength but yet lacks aggressiveness. There is nothing bold or uneven about it, and yet it has a charm and attractiveness that belong only to women.

When working on the realization Hayden was shown off as a role model for all female professionals. But when she got exhausted from the pressure of work and fame, she became the proof that women didn't have the strength to be architects.

With the building Hayden managed to solve the conflict of the site, it overcame the separation of the midway and the park. The building also subverted the sanctioned position of women. It operated as a two-faced mask that enjoyed the park but also bound it to the midway. The building had four stage-like entrances, one in each cardinal point, which opened up to a rotunda. The four façades of the rectangular building played the theatrical mirror game. The long façades of the Park-side and the Midway Plaisance-side mirrored each other, just like the short north and south facing façades. Visitors passed from one part of the Fair to the other through the rotunda. The building can be seen as a play that allows for movement within a bounded space. A surface transgressing the dichotomy of the fairground layout. The norm is challenged by the ornate disguise.<sup>21</sup>

### Curtain

In site specific theater the scene is put into a setting and comes out of a setting. It is also a reciprocal relation where the stage is both pre-existing within the site and creates the site. What traces does it leave? The architecture



of The World's Columbian Exposition was ephemeral. After half a year, and 27 million visitors, it was demolished. The ornaments lasted. They were collected as stolen objects and now adorn other walls. In some cases the entire fair building was dismantled and reassembled. The Building of the Kingdom of Sweden and Norway now houses a visitor's center in Norway, Wisconsin. The site of The Woman's Building is a lush perennial park, designed by landscape architect May Mac Adam. The Liberal Arts Building is the only one remaining on the former fairgrounds in Jackson Park, but its plaster dressing was changed to a permanent marble costume.<sup>23</sup>

The mass spectacle, or mass action, The storming of the Winter Palace of 1920 with 8000 actors was direc-

ted by Evreinov to educate the masses about the historical event of 1917. There was no clear distinction, but a sliding scale between performer and spectator, reality and theater. Evreinov wanted to show the storming better than reality, to embody the collective memory in a theatrical way. Place, in this instance The Palace Square, was transformed into event by a combination of action, actors and architecture. Some historical aspects of the Palace Square were made visible by this act of decoration. This theatricalization of the everyday city is a way of understanding 'Teatralnost' in relation to architecture.

The spectacle of The World's Columbian Exposition is also place transformed into event. It was staged with scenes and actors where not only the performers in the displays but also the visitors were parts of the setting. They were not merely spectators but also constructed as for example a 'mass' through the world's fair. Place as event can be understood analogous with the connection of queer theory between embodiment and performance. The 'scene' is both the nightclub and the crowd. As seen in The World's Columbian Exposition bodies were positioned through architecture. Architecture is not only made by people, it also typecasts people. However, we must also remember the strategy of the Woman's Building. The staging of architecture can act against everything that keeps the world and the people in place.

## Notes

The 1893 Fair of Masks started out as a Master thesis project at Iowa State University in 2001, and would not have been possible without the firm support and critical wit of Jennifer Bloomer. Besides models, masks, costumes, scenes and props, the thesis project also includes a dramatic text (A Pidgin Play) and performance. The figures in the text are by the author if nothing else is stated.

1. Nietzsche, Friedrich. Preface to the second edition of *The Gay Science* (*Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, 1886).
2. See for instance Bloomer, Jennifer, *Architecture and the Text: The (S)cripts of Joyce and Piranesi*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993. or Bloomer, Jennifer, "Abodes of Theory and Flesh: Tabbles of Bower", *Assemblage*, No. 17 (April, 1992).
3. Semper, Gottfried. *The four elements of architecture and other writings*. Trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p.257.

4. Semper, op.cit., p.255–256.
5. Evreinov, Nikolai, *Det allra viktigaste* (1925) – The most important – transl. Staffan Skott, 2002, is currently playing at the Stadsteatern, Unga Klara, Stockholm. Directed by Suzanne Osten with additional text by Nils Gredeby.
6. Semper, op.cit. ch.60 and Mallgrave's introduction, p 28.
7. Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York and London: Routledge, 1990.
8. For further reading: Lecoq, Jacques. With Carasso, Jean-Gabriel and Lallias, Jean-Claude. *Le Corps Poétique. Un enseignement de la création théâtrale*. Paris, Actes Sud, 1997.
9. Semper, op.cit., p.257.
10. Several sources have played great importance for information on The World's Columbian Exposition where the most important have been Truman, Ben C. ed. *History of the World's Fair*. Chicago, Illinois: Mammoth Publishing, 1893, and Weimann, Jeanne Madeline, *The Fair Women*. Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1981. The archive of maps and images at the Chicago Historical Society is also of great importance.
11. Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Trans. Parshley, H.M. (original title *Le Deuxième Sexe*. Paris: Gallimard. 1949). Conclusion.
12. Truman, Ben C. ed. *History of The World's Fair*. Chicago Illinois: Mammoth Publishing, 1893.
13. Semper was involved in the important discussion about the polychrome of Greek architecture. He even went to Partenon to detect evidence of this and right under the entablature, protected from the weather, Semper found the pigment he was looking for (It was salmon red). Semper, op.cit., Mallgrave's introduction, p 12–14.
14. For an interpretation of the queerness of Louis Sullivan's ornamentation see Bloomer, Jennifer, "D'Or", *Sexuality and Space*. Colomina, Beatriz. ed. Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992.
15. A collaborative project staged in 1989–90 which homed in on the interdependency of theory and practice. Bloomer, Jennifer "Abodes of Theory and Flesh: Tabbles of Bower", *Assemblage*, No. 17 (April, 1992).
16. Originally called the Schlesinger and Meyer departmentstore, 1898.
17. Sapmi is the land of the Same people. It occupies northern parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland and the Kola Peninsula in North West Russia. The colonial name for the Same people was Laps or Laplanders.
18. Her childhood name was probably Phoebe Ann Moses, a name she dropped when she developed her cowgirl personae Annie Oakley. The film and the musical *Annie* get your gun is based on her story.
19. For more elaborate thinking about whiteness see Dyer, Richard. *White*. London, New York: Routledge, 1997.



20. Truman, *ibid*.
21. An uncanny story of the female fascination of surfaces is *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Gilman writes about a depressed woman with too much artistic ambition. She is confined, by her caring husband, to a room with a jaundiced wallpaper. The woman becomes obsessed with the pattern of the wallpaper, and discovers there are women creeping behind the front design. The pattern moves because they shake it from within. In her frustration, she realizes that she is the woman creeping in the wallpaper. She tears the paper off the wall to crawl more freely.
22. Cover of *Harpers Bazaar*. Vol 26, nr 28, New York, July 15, 1893.
23. It houses the Museum of Science and Industry, where among other curiosities one can see a sliced up woman, vertical slices, and a man, horizontal slices, in transparent formaldehyde frames, dating from 1943.



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